



## FRAILITY THY NAME IS WOMAN

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From the beginning of time women have been blamed for bringing about the downfall of man. It was Eve who tempted Adam to eat from the forbidden tree. It was Helen who caused the Trojan war. It was Draupadi who was responsible for the Mahabharata. It was Sita who did not obey Laxman and was consequently abducted by Ravana. Women have also been accused of being witches. Women have always been weak and in need of male guidance. If we look towards the West, we have documentary evidence of the struggles of women. It was Simone De Beauvoir who argued that it is the society as a whole who created this creature called woman. Women were the properties of their fathers before marriage and of their husbands after marriage. Women were not expected to have literary aspirations. Charlotte Bronte's famous work *Jane Eyre* charts the life of the protagonist who is an orphan. After she is sent to an orphanage where she is educated, she gets the job of a governess in Thornfield Hall where she falls in love with the owner and marries him. Yet this book was criticized later by Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* which traces the development of Rochester's first wife Bertha Mason or Antoinette as she was originally named. Even Jane Austen had to write in full public view so as to let everyone know that she was not writing something offensive. It was Virginia Woolf who pointed out that a woman could not be fully independent unless she had a room of her own and five hundred pounds. Women revolted against male hegemony all over the world. Henrik Ibsen's Nora shut the door on her husband and family ushering an era of female independence all over Europe. What Nora did was shocking and blasphemous. Women fought for their rights and started demanding the right to education and the right to own property, even the right to vote. Yet if we look closely feminism was not without its flaws. While on one hand they advocated freedom for all women and sisterhood on the other they were mute spectators to the atrocities committed on women of colour.

Before discussing the works of women of colour I would like to point out how even the work of great writers of the nineteenth century dealt with the woman question. Women were divided into two groups. The ones who were meek and subservient were angels and the ones who defied the society's dictates were monsters. In Anna Karenina we see how a woman who wants to follow her own desires has no recourse but suicide in the end. Likewise, Madam Bovary and Therese Raquin too meet a similar fate because they too defy the norms set by the society. Suicide is the only recourse left open for them. Women who obeyed men and the rules set by society were justly rewarded with happy families. We see this in the novels of Jane Austen. In *Pride and Prejudice* where the meek and submissive Jane is rewarded with a rich and loving husband while a defiant Lydia is punished with a greedy husband.

While the work of white women is privileged, the work of women of colour is not. If we look at the colonial era especially Africa, we see how black women were tortured and kept in a submissive role like nannies and slaves. African men and women were captured like animals and transported to England and America to work in the plantations as indentured labourers. They were transported in ships which were so overloaded that most of the slaves died in the journey and their dead bodies were thrown into the sea. The ones who did make the journey had to live a life worse than death. Historical records show how black people were treated in America. Slave narratives are integral to Black literature. Harriet Smith gave the cry "Ain't I a woman". Toni Morrison narrates the sufferings of black men and women in her novel *Beloved*. The novel traces the journey of Sethe, a black woman and her desire to be free. It speaks of the anguish of a mother who kills her infant daughter rather than make her a slave.

In America the Black Power movement and feminism were on the rise but they did not give adequate representation to the concerns of black women. Feminists only wanted to talk about how men oppressed women. Likewise, black men only wanted to focus on race. The journey towards freedom for black women was hard and arduous. Black women were placed on the intersection of race and gender. Harlem renaissance gave black men and women to articulate themselves through poetry, music, art and literature. It was under Abraham Lincoln that slavery was abolished.

The journey for women of colour is far from over. Women of other ethnicities continue their struggle in the hope of finally overthrowing the yoke of imperialism and patriarchy. Women writers from the Indian subcontinent like Kamla Das,

Taslina Nasrin, Tehmina Durrani continue to explore uncharted territories. Their concerns explore the themes of religion and in case of India, partition. Thus, women continue to break their long-held silence to make their voice heard. They no longer commit Sati on their husband's pyre but question age old regressive beliefs.